

# WORKING TOGETHER FOR A SOCIAL EUROPE



**FGTB**

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# FOREWORD

Welcome to Europe! With its fascinating and tumultuous history, this continent has not only experienced horrific events – it also embodies a commitment to cooperation and progress. Immediately after the Second World War, Europe became a symbol of hope, recovery and solidarity. In the current complex geopolitical period, it is vital that we nurture this ideal of solidarity and shared progress.

In light of the Belgian EU presidency and upcoming European elections, we find ourselves at a pivotal moment. These events provide unique opportunities for us to have greater influence on the course of Europe and fight against the threat of austerity policies, which could damage our social and trade union rights, including the right to strike.

Our everyday lives are directly affected by European policies. From inflation to wage stagnation, together with increasing housing and energy prices, Europe is facing the challenge of bringing about a just transition in terms of climate change, climate neutral economy and digitalisation. This objective must be achieved as part of the goal of building a social Europe.

The fundamental problem continues to be the imbalance between social and economic issues within the European structure. Social Europe exists, but it is too limited and it is still difficult to achieve any progress. But, without solidarity, there is no Europe. Without social cohesion, Europe has no future, as it cannot be reduced to an economic market merely open to competition. Economic integration has left too much scope for neoliberal abuses, which have led to cuts in social spending, without being able to guarantee a better tax burden distribution, as well as too many situations of social and tax dumping, or increasing inequalities.

For this reason, we are working closely with the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) and other trade unions in Europe to defend the interests of millions of workers and for a European society in which social justice, equality and freedom are of primary importance. We are striving to anchor these values more firmly in the European model, in order to create a society, in which economic progress, sustainability and justice go hand in hand. We play a central role in social dialogue and collective bargaining in Europe, by influencing European legislation and policies relating to working conditions, wages, workers' rights and social inclusion.

In this context, we must also be vigilant in relation to the rise of the extreme right, which poses a threat to human and workers' rights. It also seems essential that we should fight for greater purchasing power, higher wages, better pensions and improved working conditions. A strong social pillar in Europe is our most powerful weapon against the threat of the far right.

Join our movement for a social Europe, in which everyone benefits from shared prosperity, with environmental and social justice at the heart of our concerns. Together, we can build a future in which exploitation will belong to the past and solidarity will be the norm. Welcome to the Europe of tomorrow where we are committed to preserving and reinforcing our fundamental rights at crucial moments, such as the Belgian presidency and European elections.

**Miranda ULENS**  
General Secretary



**Thierry Bodson**  
President



# 1. What is (social) Europe?

Europe is closer to home for us Belgians than for other Europeans. Our capital is also the capital of Europe. Many decisions are made at European level, which affect our work, lives and pocketbooks. It is crucial that we bear all of this in mind. In 2023, political frontiers are not limited to our national borders.

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Europe may pride itself on having a fascinating history, which is built on progress and social change and progress. Initially, the European idea was primarily political, based on cooperation, freedom, equality and unity. This idea developed mainly at economic level, with the creation of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1958, following signature of the Treaty of Rome by countries, such as Germany, Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

## EVERYDAY LIFE

Europe's influence on our social policies is deep and wide. When we think about Europe, mainly in the context of the European Union (EU), we see a political entity that not only shapes social norms and regulations, but also has a direct impact on our everyday lives.

Europe has played a crucial role in promoting workers' rights and harmonisation of the labour market, which involves guaranteeing fundamental rights and promoting fair working conditions, which are essential for the welfare of workers.

But we have not yet reached the end of the journey. There is still work to do. Whether we consider the creation of democratic institutions, such as the European Parliament or pioneering laws relating to human rights: Europe has often been at the forefront of social innovation.

After all, one of the fundamental aspects of the EU is the promotion of social justice and equality. This goal has been achieved by means of directives that prohibit discrimination according to gender, race, religion, age or sexual orientation. These measures guarantee equal opportunities and treatment for all citizens in fields, such as employment, education and healthcare.

## IN REAL TERMS

The EU plays a crucial role in improving working conditions. Regulations concerning working hours, safety at work and vacation leave are established in order to protect workers, while pushing for a better work-life balance.

These regulations range from consumer rights to environmental legislation, as well as the protection of privacy and opportunities to travel within the EU. As citizens, we feel the effects of these decisions on our jobs, schools, universities, health systems and even our rights and freedoms. Budgetary rules also apply at European level, which means that our governments have to respect certain financial agreements.

Moreover, Europe has embarked on a common journey towards greater social equality, environmental sustainability and economic stability. Europe is a place where healthcare, education and social security are considered fundamental rights, which reflects the continent's commitment to the welfare of its citizens.

## FIGHTING POVERTY

As part of the fight against poverty and social exclusion, Europe supports programmes aimed at reducing the gap between different regions and supporting vulnerable groups. This helps create a more inclusive society, in which everyone can contribute to and benefit from progress, as well as prosperity.

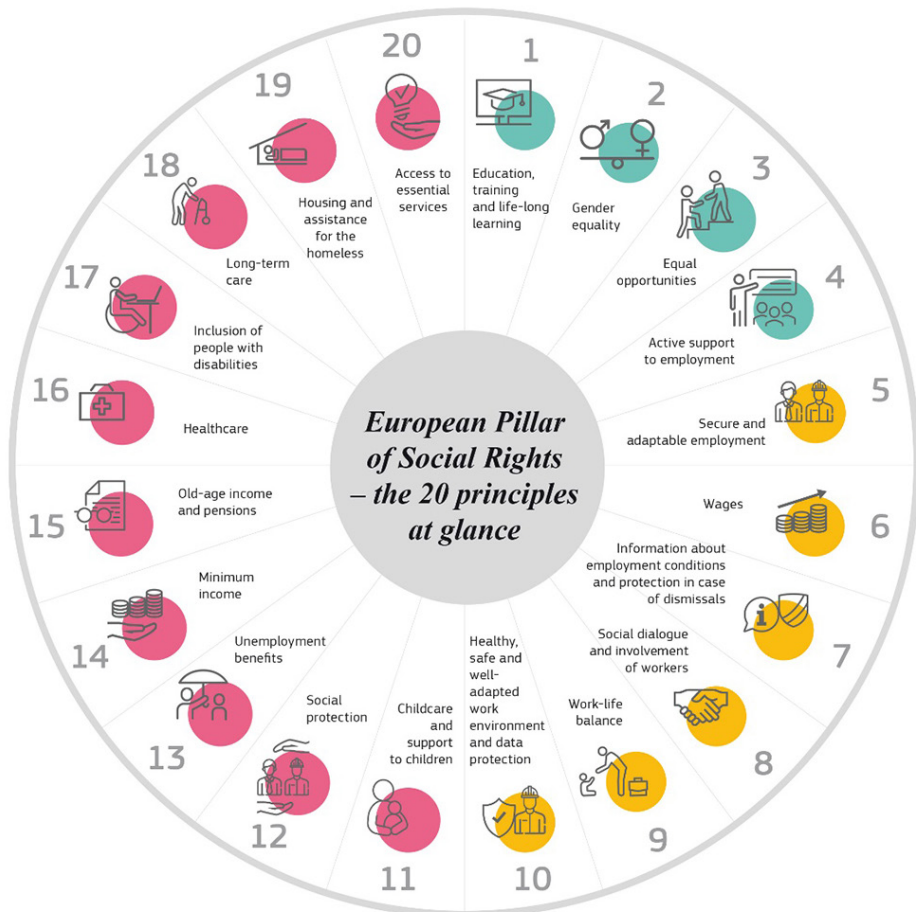
In the field of education and training, the EU promotes mobility for students and workers within its borders. Programmes, such as Erasmus+, encourage intercultural exchanges and understanding. Europe also plays a key role in health policy, by encouraging cooperation between member states, which makes it possible to improve exchanges and the quality of care, while responding more directly to health threats.

Cooperation within Europe harmonises these policies and standards across national borders, which results in a more uniform and fair society. All of this reflects the importance of the European Union for the development of our social policies and their everyday impact on us as citizens. But the situation could be even better. It has to be better. This is what makes the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) so important.

# 2. The Social Pillar in Europe

The European Pillar of Social Rights, which is promoted by the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), aims to reinforce our social rights within the European Union (EU). The ETUC, of which the FGTB (General Labour Federation of Belgium) forms part, focuses on three key areas: equal opportunities and access to the labour market, fair working conditions, and social protection and inclusion.

Please take a look at this useful overview:



Firstly, the EPSR focuses on equal opportunities and access to the labour market. This involves, for example, promoting gender equality, fighting discrimination and guaranteeing equal opportunities for all EU citizens. The emphasis is placed on creating opportunities for the young, elderly and disabled people, while supporting lifelong learning and skills development.

Secondly, the EPSR stresses the importance of fair working conditions. This means that workers are entitled to a fair wage, safe working conditions and reasonable working hours. The ETUC is committed to protecting workers' rights, including the right of collective bargaining, while combating precarious and atypical work. We need to consider working with ground-breaking technologies, such as the platform economy.

Finally, the EPSR concentrates on social protection. This involves, in particular, making every effort to guarantee adequate social protection for everyone and fighting poverty, as well as social exclusion. The ETUC supports policies aimed at guaranteeing access to quality social services, such as healthcare, education and social security.

Implementation of the EPSR requires cooperation between the EU institutions, member states, social partners and other stakeholders. The ETUC plays a key role in this respect, by pushing for strong social norms and representing workers' interests at European level. By means of these joint efforts, the EPSR aims to create a more inclusive, fair and social European Union.

## **WORKERS' RIGHTS**

The European Union has already implemented a series of very important measures for workers, in order to contribute to a fairer and safer working environment in its member states.

Here are a few real examples:



The directive on **adequate minimum wages** was the first important development, as it represents a major forward step in terms of guaranteeing fair wages for all workers in the EU. The directive stipulates that, in countries with a statutory minimum wage, the latter must be evaluated according to criteria defined by the social partners. Over time, it should guarantee that workers receive a wage that enables them to have a decent life, which is a fundamental aspect of social justice and equality. The directive also aims to reinforce social consultation in the member states. While fewer than 80% of workers are covered by a collective agreement, countries will now be required to produce an action plan in order to encourage social consultation. It goes without saying that our work is not finished in this area either. Ultimately, a great deal will depend on the willingness of the member states to implement the directive effectively.

Another important initiative is the **European regulation on vacation leave**. The latter guarantees that workers have sufficient time to rest and recuperate, which is an essential factor that contributes to the welfare and productivity of workers, while ensuring a good work-life balance.

The **directive on the posting of workers** tackles the problem of social dumping. It guarantees that posted workers benefit from the same working conditions as local workers, which promotes fairer conditions for competition, while protecting local and posted workers from exploitation.

Europe has every interest in stepping up the fight against social dumping. Workers from the four corners of Europe have fallen victim to this evil for many years. This is why an ambitious revision of the directive on the posting of workers is needed. Firstly, the principle of “equal pay for equal work” must be widely adopted. Secondly, the temporary agency sector should be excluded from the scope of the directive. In fact, the linking of “temporary employment” and “posting” is the source of a wide range of abuses and fraud. Thirdly, the period of posting should be limited to six months, which is currently not the case. By definition, posting is temporary.

The creation of the **European Labour Authority** was also a turning point. Will it really prove to be effective in the fight against social fraud or just end up being a paper tiger? By creating the European Labour Authority (ELA), Europe plans to help countries to fight against abuses and the exploitation of workers employed in other EU countries. Together with the other European trade unions, we consider this to be a modest first step. In fact, the European Labour Authority must be given sufficient authority and greater importance.

On average, 17 million people in the European Union are working in a country that is not their own. Differences in terms of wages, social security and taxes, as well as loopholes in the legislation, enable shady employers to exploit workers by paying poverty wages and providing inhumane conditions. All kinds of abuses exist - from fake self-employed workers to unjustified posting and shell companies that are nothing other than letterboxes. This is known as social dumping and is rife in all sectors, but especially visible in transport, construction, cleaning, security, metallurgy, call centres and IT. The FGTB is working to ensure that social dumping in Europe becomes an absolute “no pasarán” – in other words, strictly off limits.

**In 2003, the European institutions adopted an important directive on working hours.** This directive is a fundamental part of the single market regulations and aims to protect the health and safety of workers. It emphasises the importance of vacation leave, breaks during working hours and a guaranteed rest day, combined with competition between member states and employers that does not have to be to the detriment of workers' welfare.

Another important aspect of this directive is the requirement for employers to pay for overtime. It comes as a response to the practices of certain employers who try to force workers to work more without adequate compensation, for example, by claiming that the working day begins later or conducting excessive checks on working time using new technologies.

This directive underlines the importance of strict legislation, which employers are required to respect in order to combat these unacceptable practices. All these measures help to create a stronger, fairer and safer working environment throughout the European Union, which is at the heart of its commitment to social justice and the protection of workers.

Whether we are citizens or workers, this affects all of us. Decisions made in Europe, often as the result of a complex negotiation process between member states, directly influence the applicable laws and regulations in our countries.

# 3. Working towards a social and fair Europe: our European memorandum

Europe will be either social or not at all. Imagine a Europe, in which everyone really works hand in hand and it is not just about saying the right things. A place where social justice is not a rare commodity, but the norm. Where empathy is not incidental, but a powerful catalyst behind every decision. This is the Europe, in which we want to build our future. We must make every effort to create a cohesive community, which welcomes everyone with open arms and faces the future with an open mind.

A future with a social Europe is not only a pipe dream. It is a future direction that we can actively shape by means of policy, innovation and citizen involvement. By consistently committing itself to social progress, Europe can become a beacon of hope and an example to the rest of the world. The social dimension must be at the heart of the European project.

The future vision of a social Europe would involve closer integration of its various communities. This means that we have to break down physical and social barriers so that everyone – regardless of their origin, ethnicity or socio economic status – can become a fully-fledged participant in the European social project.

This is what makes a Europe based on social values so important. We have to work towards a Europe that adapts economic progress to sustainability and justice. What would we be striving for? An economy that benefits everyone, in which resources and wealth are distributed fairly and environment management is at the forefront of development. We must end exploitation once and for all!

Europe needs to become a world leader in terms of social protection and rights. This involves improving labour legislation, in order to respond to the challenges of the modern labour market and extend social security systems, while guaranteeing the dignity and rights of each individual. Europe must strengthen us so that we are able to face challenges, such as artificial intelligence and climate change.

The 2024 European Parliament elections will be the most important in many years. They will determine whether Europe remains on the path of progress and solidarity, as we have seen in its response to the coronavirus crisis, and whether it supports workers and their communities across Europe; or if it returns to austerity, with deregulation for workers.

Our answer to this question could not be clearer. We need a strong social Europe that guarantees a better standard of living for its citizens, a social Europe that works hard to create a more inclusive, just and fair society. Implementation of the EPSR and sustainable development goals is one of the necessary stages in arriving at this situation. They should form the cornerstone of policies adopted by European institutions during the next legislative session.

The European elections must result in a European Parliament and Commission, which are committed to working towards a fair Europe with secure jobs, decent wages, excellent public services, equality for everyone and strong workers' rights, as well as the reinforcement of collective bargaining and social dialogue. Attacks directed at trade unions must not be tolerated. This is the only way of ensuring that it is possible to defend and reinforce democracy in Europe.

## **WORKING TOWARDS A TRULY SOCIAL EUROPE**

Europe faces heavy criticism for placing too much emphasis on balancing budgets and reducing debt. While financial stability is essential, this approach often leads to austerity measures with negative social consequences. Focusing on strict budgetary constraints may lead to social spending cuts, which have an impact on social security and public services that are essential for the welfare of citizens.

The reform process that imposes these budgetary targets has also been criticised. This process often fails to take sufficient account of social criteria, which can lead to policies that exacerbate social inequalities instead of reducing them. More emphasis is often placed on economic efficiency than on social justice.

The absence of decisive tax measures at European level is another cause for concern. The problem is that no effective measures are in place that could combat fraud and tax evasion, which leads to unfair distribution of the tax burden. This situation compromises the capacity of member states to invest in essential social services and programmes.

Priority must be given to the construction of a truly social Europe, in which social and fundamental rights are on the same level as economic rights. Europe has a wide variety of tools aimed at liberalising markets, but not for tackling their social consequences.

A Social Progress Protocol and the creation of an effective and binding European Pillar of Social Rights are achievable goals for the next European legislative term. More precisely, negotiations focusing on legislative proposals from the previous legislative session must be concluded and work must continue on the construction of a social Europe, based on the impetus created by the social pillar.

## **MORE AND BETTER QUALITY JOBS**

We want more and better quality jobs in Europe. The idea is to create jobs that not only fill our pockets, but also give us real job satisfaction and a meaning to our lives. They will also help us contribute to society.

While Europe is recovering from a series of crises, more than ever before, our continent wants to focus on long-term employment, with the aim of ensuring that 78% of people have a job by 2030. This may seem rather ambitious, but that is not all. The EU wants companies, trade unions and policy makers to work together to achieve this goal. This means that we must talk, negotiate, share ideas and work together to ensure that the workplace embraces innovation and social protection.

The EU gives special assistance and additional support to young and under-qualified people. They have greater difficulty on the labour market. This was demonstrated once again by the COVID-19 pandemic. You only have to think of sectors, such as the tourism or cultural sector, which were seriously affected. This additional assistance was therefore more than welcome.

Things are also beginning to move in the social economy sector. The social economy is about far more than jobs that provide an income at the end of the month. These jobs also tackle societal problems. We must consider sectors, in which innovation and social responsibility go hand in hand. There is enormous potential. In some countries, only 1% of the active population works in this sector, whereas the figure can be as high as 10% in other countries. Many opportunities are opening up to us. The EU is developing major projects for our labour market. This is more than just a simple task, but it will be useful in terms of helping us develop and strengthen our society.

## A NEW ERA WITH NEW CHALLENGES

In the EU, working conditions are reasonable. Regulations guarantee decent working hours, safety in the workplace and equal opportunities for everyone, regardless of their identity. Workers from other countries benefit from the same advantages as people from the EU. However, the world of work is developing rapidly, due mainly to the effect of digitalisation. New jobs are appearing, along with new challenges.

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We want everyone to have a quality job under decent conditions. The aim is to reduce taxation on labour and place greater emphasis on environment-friendly resources. But we still have to ensure that sufficient financial resources are available for our social security system.

The fight against poverty and inequality between workers is also a key question. The number of underpaid jobs is exploding and the traditional wage bargaining system is falling apart in some countries. We need to change this situation and tackle it differently. A well-paid job is essential if everyone is to have a pleasant life.

In addition, we are faced with two other extremely important challenges: climate change and technological innovation. These two transitions – in our lives and on the labour market – have to be social.

Climate or environmental transition must become an instrument for social justice and the latter will be a driving force behind the transition to a 100% carbon free economy. In addition, this transition must result in the creation of sustainable and quality jobs.

Digitalisation, automation and artificial intelligence will have an impact on our work and society. In this respect, a broader and people-based approach to new technologies should be at the forefront, in a similar way to how privacy is protected in the workplace. AI is omnipresent - from recruitment to workload evaluation. We must ensure that these systems are balanced and transparent.

Since the COVID-19 crisis, teleworking has been widely accepted by a major proportion of the working population. It has become a new norm. Digitalisation and teleworking certainly call for a wider debate with all the stakeholders.

## SAFETY AT WORK, WHILE ENJOYING A GOOD LIFE

The EU also wishes to update the rules concerning health and safety in the workplace. Why is this necessary? The world is developing at lightning speed and this phenomenon is accompanied by all the new technologies and societal upheavals. The underlying idea is as follows: a healthy and safe working environment is not only important when it comes to protecting workers, it also helps maintain productivity and keep the economy moving.

The decision makers are working to develop a new European plan aimed at guaranteeing health and safety for everyone in the workplace. This plan will define the basic rules and objectives for a common approach. In order to achieve this, the different governments are working with the trade unions and other stakeholders, in order to guarantee safety and protection in the work place. Of course, this is no bad thing. It also explains why we are monitoring this project very closely.

In Europe, it is important that people can work in different countries. Recently, the EU worked hard to develop regulations aimed at making this type of work fairer and easier. For example, it examined questions, such as regulations for workers employed temporarily in other countries, how social security is regulated when people work across borders and special regulations for people working in the transport sector, such as truck drivers. It is also tackling undeclared work and created the European Labour Authority, in order to regulate everything. In addition, it will be necessary to put an end to dumping social.

The revision of the directive by European works councils emphasises the need to implement the information and worker consultation regulations effectively within European organisations. It is essential that effective and dissuasive sanctions are guaranteed in order to ensure that the regulations are respected. Currently, the situation is not ideal in terms of the extent, to which regulations are respected, and the EU plans to help the member states to rectify this situation. The development of information and knowledge plays a key role in this process.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of workers, such as seasonal workers who work across borders. It is essential that their rights and working conditions are improved in order to facilitate mobility for the workforce within the EU. This will require cooperation between the governments and trade unions, such as the FGTB, in order to guarantee adequate protection for these international workers.

## LEARNING AND WORKING

A strong economy relies, above all, on well trained people. For this reason, we want the EU to continue investing in education, training and learning. By 2030, 60% of workers should be learning something new or receiving training every year. It may seem like a huge task, but this goal can be achieved with help from the authorities and employers. Additional resources would also be more than welcome in this case.

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Ideally, workers should engage in learning throughout their lives. This can be achieved by means of personal career paths, which enable us to plan our own careers and complete training courses. But this entire process has to be well organised, with quality controls and ways of gaining recognition for people's skills.

The European population is increasingly elderly. New and young talents are more than welcome. Areas and sectors exist, in which we are sorely lacking skilled people. This is why the EU wishes to facilitate the arrival and work undertaken by people from third countries. This measure forms part of the framework for a new plan relating to asylum and migration. The EU therefore wants to attract the people that we desperately need here and facilitate access to our labour market for non-European workers.

## A DIVERSIFIED EUROPE, A STRONG EUROPE

Diversity is an essential part of our society and economy. Discrimination, according to gender, origin, religion, disability, age or whether we happen to like the person, has no place in the EU. Everyone must be treated equally and offered the same opportunities. In order to do this, we have to create appropriate and verifiable rules.

The FGTB therefore helps to monitor rules for equal treatment in the workplace. We are opposed to any form of discrimination. In this context, we must examine positive aspects and areas for improvement. If there is a gap in the laws, we will have to amend them.

But there is still a lot of work to be done, particularly with regard to unequal treatment of men and women. Women work even less frequently than men and earn less. The wage and pension gap continues to exist. Discussions are underway with the focus on new rules aimed at guaranteeing that men and women are paid in the same way for the same work. The FGTB is a leader in this field and committed to combating gender discrimination.

It is also important to balance our professional and private lives. Measures, such as paid holidays, can help women to work more and reduce the gap between men and women in terms of employment. How parental leave is regulated, for example, pay levels and the option for men and women to share parental leave, plays an



important role in this respect. Within the EU, we are striving to ensure that family and professional obligations are shared fairly. The FGTB considers it essential that our professional and private lives are properly and fairly shared within families.

Everyone has his place. Disabled people experience all kinds of problems, for example, at school, when looking for a job, in terms of social protection, housing and healthcare. This is another thing that we have to fight.

Democracy and the extreme right are diametrically opposed. It is only in a democratic Europe that we can work on solidarity, seek better lives, social justice and opportunities for all workers, regardless of their past lives. Democracy is synonymous with unity and not division. The FGTB has put a strict sanitary cordon in place for MEPs, parties and movements of the extreme right.

# 4. A trade union on your side: FGTB and ETUC

Trade unions have always played a crucial part in the development and implementation of social policies and workers' rights. Not only in Europe, but also at the four corners of the world. We are the voice of the working classes. We are on the front line when it comes to defending fair working practices, such as reasonable working hours, safe working conditions and fair wages.

The European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC) is Europe's biggest trade union federation. FGTB was a co-founder member when it was created in 1973. During all these years, ETUC has played a crucial role by representing workers' interests at European level and influencing, with the European institutions, policies aimed at protecting workers (and their welfare).

Of course, social dialogue plays a central part. ETUC enters into dialogue with employers and the authorities in order to reach an agreement on questions relating to labour, legislation and policy, in which FGTB also plays an active role.

Day after day, together with ETUC and other European trade unions, we fight for better conditions, labour standards and are committed to protecting jobs against threats, such as outsourcing, social dumping and the impact of new technologies. We make every effort to promote workers' interests and rights, while ensuring that they remain at the forefront, despite the pressures that can be caused by economic changes.

We participate in the development of policies, which prepare workers for the future of work in Europe. It is a question of promoting lifelong learning and recycling, in order to ensure that the workforce has the necessary skills in a changing market and encourage innovations that may create new jobs.

We also influence social policies in a broader sense. We take part in discussions and negotiations that shape legislation and regulations relating to social security, healthcare and pensions, so that policies reflect workers' needs.

In a nutshell, trade unions, led by ETUC and FGTB, are the front line when it comes to defending workers' interests in a social Europe, which is facing economic transformation and future challenges. Together, we will ensure that a bridge is built between the old and new economy, so that this transition is fair and equitable for our workers.

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